DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 384 061 CS 214 918

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TITLE Curriculum Framework for Journal Writing in Primary Grades.
PUB DATE May 94
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Reading Association (39th, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, May 8-13, 1994).
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Childrens Writing; *Elementary School Curriculum; Instructional Effectiveness; *Journal Writing; Primary Education; *Self Expression; *Student Journals; Teacher Student Relationship; *Writing Exercises; Writing Instruction; *Writing Processes
IDENTIFIERS Process Approach (Writing); *Writing Development

ABSTRACT

Through journal writing children have the opportunity to explore learning, feelings, experiences and language. It is a very effective means of helping students develop writing skills through a process approach. Here is a framework for exploring the possibility of including a journal writing program in an elementary school curriculum: (1) consider the rationale for the use of journal writing; (2) consider learning goals and objectives that may be met through the use of journal writing; (3) consider procedures for establishing and maintaining a dynamic journal writing program; (4) consider how student growth can be assessed in journal writing; and (5) consider how the effectiveness of journal writing can be evaluated. Recent research shows that journal writing allows students to express individual thoughts and ideas; to experiment with language for a reason and in a purposeful manner; and to develop critical and creative thinking skills. However, the way teachers respond to students' writing can have a powerful influence on their students' writing development. When teachers and students emphasize the importance of writing mechanics, such as correct spelling, capitalization, punctuation, grammar, writing can be inhibited. Teachers should make a special effort to be encouraging of all student journal entries and should avoid vague one-word responses such as "great"; one or two pointed sentences is more effective. In evaluating the program teachers need to determine whether their journal writing programs have met their instructional goals, and they also need to consider what students think about journal writing. (Contains 26 references and a 26-item resource list.) (TB)

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ED 384 061

CURRICULUM FRAMEWORK FOR JOURNAL WRITING IN PRIMARY GRADES

Abstract
(96 words)

This paper provides a framework for developing writing skills through the use of journal writing in the primary grades. Teachers are encouraged to consider the following elements in developing a writing curriculum that includes the use of journals: (a) rationale for the use of journals, (b) learning goals and objectives that may be met through the use of journals, (c) procedures for establishing and maintaining the program, (d) procedures for assessing student growth in written expression, and (e) methods of evaluating program effectiveness. Specific teaching recommendations for journal writing are provided, and additional resources are listed.

Information submittted in the paper was presented at the International Reading Association Annual Convention in Toronto, May, 1994

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A CURRICULUM FRAMEWORK FOR JOURNAL WRITING IN PRIMARY GRADES

The purpose of this paper is to share a framework for developing writing skills through the use of journal writing in the primary grades. Through journal writing children have the opportunity to explore learning, feelings, experiences and language (Routmann, 1991). Our framework is organized in the following manner:

I. Rationale for the use of journal writing

II. Learning goals and objectives that may be met through the use of journal writing

III. Procedures for establishing and maintaining a dynamic journal writing program

IV. Assessing student growth in written expression through journal writing

V. Evaluating the effectiveness of the journal writing curriculum.

It is important to note that while this curriculum is intended to provide information for teachers, it is not a prescription for development of a journal writing program for all primary classrooms. The techniques outlined in this paper are only guides which may help focus teacher observations, deepen insights, inform curricular decision-making, and help teachers reflect upon the student's role in journal writing. To that end it is hoped that teachers will personalize their approaches to the use of journal writing in their classrooms, tailoring their use of this methodology to their own teaching situations.

I. Rationale for the use of journal writing

Journal writing is only one piece of a writing curriculum. It is important to consider how writing curriculum is changing to meet our current understanding of the writing process. With our shifting theoretical understanding of writing over the past several years, curriculum development in the field of writing has shifted as well.

Langer and Allington (1992) provide a historical perspective of writing curriculum and how it has been received. For a long time writing was viewed as a product. Student writing was evaluated according to its form and presentation without concern for how the student developed his writing. Eventually educators began to consider writing as an individual experience rather than merely something produced by students, but it was still viewed as a mechanical presentation of ideas. In the 1970's and 80's theorists no longer considered writing to be simply an individual learning experience. They began to view writing development as a social and cognitive process where students discover knowledge. This move from a product to a process conceptualization of writing has influenced curricular reform.

While educational researchers and theorists seemed to be changing their thinking about writing, change in teaching practice has been slow. There have been widespread attempts to familiarize teachers with process writing approaches. Teachers have been trained to lead students through the process of developing pieces of writing, moving from rough draft to final copy form. Unfortunately curriculum materials have not necessarily changed to meet these demands. Many textbook exercises have still been largely product-oriented, focusing on grammar and usage with few opportunities for extensive writing. As a result, the received writing curriculum in elementary school has been characterized by drill and practice exercises which emphasize mechanics such as capitalization, punctuation, and grammar.

Our recent experience and observation in elementary classrooms paint a brighter picture of writing instruction. We believe that teachers are increasingly providing students with opportunities to develop their written language skills in meaningful ways. While the textbooks teachers must use have still not caught up with our understanding of writing, teachers are finding ways to provide writing experiences outside those suggested in the texts. This job has not always been easy. Writing serves a variety of purposes (Dyson &

Freeman, 1991). Teachers are trying to develop writing experiences that give students an opportunity to use writing:

1. to express individual thoughts and ideas
2. to experiment with language
3. for a reason, in a purposeful manner
4. in various forms across various situations
5. as a form of communication with others
6. to learn information
7. to develop critical and creative thinking skills

Research has shown that writing is not only important for writing's sake, but it has a powerful influence on student learning in other areas. There is evidence that writing leads students to extend their thinking and acquire multiple perspectives on a topic (Tierney, O'Flahaven & McGinley, 1989). Theorists and researchers believe that writing helps students to make greater sense of their own learning (Britton, 1970; Halliday, 1975, Polanyi, 1969). It provides a vehicle which reveals to teachers student understanding or reasoning on given topics, and is a powerful strategy for learning subject matter (Vacca & Vacca, 1989).

Journal writing is a valuable learning experience in writing. This methodology has been used to develop reading comprehension (Jennings, 1991) and is advocated as an effective way to personalize learning in math (Gordon & MacInnis, 1993) and other disciplines (Bowman, 1983; D'Arcy, 1987; Fulwiler, 1980, 1985). Journal use helps students develop writing skills in an informal, nonthreatening manner (Bode, 1989; McGee, 1992; Wollman-Bonilla, 1989), and this writing development lends itself to evaluation by both the student (Hansen, 1992) and teacher (Kintisch, 1986). In fact, some elementary basal reading series have begun to replace traditional workbooks with a form of student journals (Pikulski, 1991). Journal writing has become widely accepted as a valuable learning experience in writing.

II. Learning goals and objectives that may be met through the use of journal writing

The beauty of journal writing lies in its ease of implementation without the added expense of commercial preparation. Journals provide a ready-made, open-ended instructional experience that fits current theory about how writing should be taught. Journal writing experiences are consistent with recommended learning experiences from the National Council of Teachers of English (Shanahan & Knight, 1991) and University of Illinois Center for the Study of Reading (Adoption Guidelines Project, 1990). They:

1. focus attention on written content first and mechanics later
2. encourage use of the individual's own language
3. have writing goals that are purposeful, genuine, and functional
4. allow children to approach writing in different ways
5. may be used by children for writing on a daily basis
6. respect cultural and other differences in our society

We believe that journals also:

7. give children a chance to communicate their individual thoughts and ideas in writing
8. provide a vehicle for the teacher to reciprocate in this communication process
9. serve as evidence of growth in written expression
10. influence the ways teacher understand student learning and progress
11. support teachers' instructional decision-making
12. help other audiences, such as parents and related school personnel see growth in student learning
13. provide students an opportunity to view their own progress over time
14. enable students to experiment with language
15. spark creativity
16. value individual intentions
17. help students develop written language fluency by providing writing practice on a regular basis
18. develop in students a positive attitude toward writing

Our journal writing curriculum focuses on the use of a personal response journal. Students use a personal response journal to express privately, and in writing, their thoughts, feelings and ideas. Here students use writing much like oral communication to

talk with their teacher and/or peers. Teachers are expected to provide supportive written responses to students in a friendly, nonthreatening manner. These responses are recorded in the student journal which serves as the written conversation.

III. Procedures for establishing and maintaining a dynamic journal writing program

A first step in the development of a journal writing program will be for the teacher to decide why journal writing is being used as an instructional experience. We suggest teachers use of the following guiding questions as they work their way through the planning and implementation process.

1. What are my goals for journal writing? What do I want my students to learn this year through their journal writing experiences? What do my students want to accomplish through journal writing?
2. What do I need to do to help students begin writing in their journals? What are my students' prior experiences in writing?
3. What is my role in this process, a model, guide, observer, listener, etc.? What are students' roles?
4. How will I set up the program in my classroom (i.e. time frame for journal use, topic choices, sharing responses, frequency of written responses by teacher, etc.)?
5. How will I maintain student interest in journal writing throughout the course of the program?
6. How will I assess student growth in written language through journals?
7. How will my understanding of this growth affect my teaching?
8. What can I do to help students reflect on their progress through journals?
9. How will I evaluate the effectiveness of the journal writing program?
10. What can I do to make the program more effective for my students? What can students do to help each other?

It is often difficult for teachers to think about all of the issues related to journal writing. The following suggestions may help teachers make decisions about their journal writing program (Barchers, 1990; Kirby & Liner, 1988; Strackbein & Tillman, 1987).

Role of the Teacher

It is important for teachers to consider what role they will assume in the journal writing process. Teachers may want to:

* explain what will take place during the journal writing time, what the students will be writing about, how often they will be writing, etc.

* assure students that journals will not be graded and that they will be confidential.

* consider ways to stimulate journal writing, perhaps by discussing a recent event, telling a personal story, creating a print-rich classroom environment, modeling how to write a journal entry, keeping a personal teacher journal, etc.

* involve parents in the journal writing program, perhaps by having students take their journals home for parent response.

Role of the Student

Teachers should also consider what roles students will play in their journal writing experiences. Teachers may want to:

* allow students to select their own topics, determine the audience for their writing, and decide how entries are to be shared.

* intentionally model supportive behaviors which help students become independent in choosing topics, writing, and responding appropriately. Students can then more easily become self-sufficient writers and supportive role models in their interactions with peers.

* provide students with opportunities to revisit and discuss previous journal entries and encourage them to reflect upon their own growth and learning.

Procedures for Getting Started

Other issues that must be addressed are related to time and topic. Teachers may want to:

- prioritize journal writing by setting aside a specific time for this activity (when and how often), for example, after lunch or recess, daily, etc.
- begin with short time periods gradually increasing the time for the activity, perhaps by using a timer in the classroom.
- avoid distractions during this time so that students have the opportunity to focus on their writing.
- allow children to choose their own topics, but for reluctant writers, be prepared to encourage journal responses by suggesting topics if necessary.
- initially accept alternative ways of writing in journals, but encourage students to become more fluent writers over time. For example, children may be allowed to draw pictures or copy environmental print if their prior experiences with writing are limited.
- model the writing process: think aloud and demonstrate how to select a topic, begin an entry, elaborate on an idea, and review what is written. It may be beneficial to begin journal writing as a large group activity.

Things to Consider When Responding to Journals

How teachers respond to students' writing can have a powerful influence on their writing development. When teachers and students emphasize the importance of writing mechanics, such as correct spelling, capitalization, punctuation, grammar, writing can be inhibited. Journals are intended to provide children opportunity to develop writing fluency, but if teachers focus on the "correctness" of the writing, this intention is lost. Teachers may want to:

- plan for responding to journal entries on a regular basis, perhaps by establishing a procedure for getting the job done (i.e. stagger journal collection dates so that all journals need not be responded to at the same time)
- consider informing students when they may expect a response.

* encourage students to mark journal entries that require a teacher response.

* model the use of correct writing mechanics in their responses, for example, if a student frequently misspells a word, the teacher may intentionally choose to use that word in his/her response.

* make a special effort to be very accepting of *all* student journal entries, for example, it may be acceptable for students to copy print from around the room, especially when journal writing is first begun.

* avoid general comments such as "great", perhaps by responding with several sentences that focus more specifically on the content.

Maintaining and Expanding the Program

Once the journal writing program is up and running, it is important to consider ways to build and strengthen motivation for journals. Teachers may want to:

* network with each other to find out what has worked well in other classes and how other teachers have implemented journal writing programs.

* read current literature regarding journal writing to get ideas that they may useful in their situations. A list of related readings is attached.

* expand the program by using journals in content areas such as social studies and science. For example, students may use journals to share their feelings, reactions, and learning about specific curricular topics.

IV. Assessing student growth in written expression through journal writing

Once the journal writing program is in place, the teacher has the opportunity to use student journals as evidence of student writing ability. Journals also give teachers insight into their students' knowledge, interests, needs, feelings, and thinking. How teachers choose to evaluate journal entries delivers a powerful message to students of what is valued in the classroom. We believe evaluation should:

1. have the same goals as instruction
2. influence learning in positive ways
3. be diagnostic, lead to increased understanding of individual student progress and needs

4. be motivating and nonthreatening
5. lead to student self-understanding
6. lead to reflective teaching practice.

Documenting progress in student writing development through journal writing can be approached from various perspectives (Bingham, 1988). Teachers must reexamine their goals for the journal writing program as they reflect upon their evaluation. As teachers examine journal entries they may choose to focus on the following aspects of the students' writing:

* Clarity of Expression - How do students express themselves in writing? Can students read what they have written? Can others read and understand it?

* Inclusion of Details - What information do students include? What information do students exclude? Are ideas becoming more elaborate over time?

* Handwriting and Organization - Are letters formed correctly? Are there frequent erasures or other evidence of frustration? Is spacing between words and sentences appropriate?

* Spelling - Are students' invented spellings consistent with the sounds of the letters within words? Do students attempt to use spelling aids? Are students making the transition from invented to conventional spelling?

* Mechanics - Do students use punctuation and grammar correctly? Do they follow conventions that have been taught in school?

* Experimentation - Do students take risks in their writing? Do they use various writing forms (e.g., drawings, lists, stories, letters, poems, songs, etc.)? Do they attempt to spell difficult words? Do they have various purposes and audiences for their writing?

Teachers may choose to document growth in journal writing by recording observations for each student. A simple way to keep track of student progress is to systematically make notes about writing behaviors observed and corresponding goals for improvement. Such documentation could be an important part of a student's literacy portfolio.

V. Evaluating the effectiveness of the journal writing program

For any instructional program to be successful, it is necessary for teachers to periodically step back, reflect and evaluate the effectiveness of the learning experiences. Does the teacher's journal writing program help students improve their writing ability? Teachers will need to determine whether their journal writing programs have met their instructional goals. Teachers may ask themselves the following questions to guide them in their assessment.

1. What are my goals for journal writing? What do I want my student to learn this year through their journal writing experiences? What are my students' goals for journal writing?
2. In what ways have these goals been met?
3. Should these goals be modified? In what ways?
4. What procedures are used to help students write in their journals?
5. Have these been effective? How?
6. Do these procedures need to be modified? How can this be done?
7. Has student interest in journal writing been maintained? How?
8. What are some other ways to encourage journal writing?
9. Have my responses to students been helpful? In what ways?
10. Have students been helpful to one another? In what ways?
11. Should response procedures be modified? If so, how?
12. How are journal writing experiences assessed? Do students reflect on their own growth as writers? Has this assessment improved teaching and learning?

Teachers also need to consider what students think about journal writing. They may want to ask their students questions such as the following:

1. What do you like most about journal writing?
2. What do you like least about journal writing?
3. If you could change one thing about journal writing, what would it be?

Student responses may be related to the organization and procedures that have been established for the program, but they may also be related to topics of interest and freedom to make choices. It would be important for the teacher to encourage a variety of responses to these questions and use this information to modify and expand the program to meet individual and group needs.

Journal writing provides a valuable learning experience for students and teachers alike. Through journal writing teachers have a window into student interests and needs, and students have an audience and environment for their writing that is nurturing and nonthreatening. It is our hope that this framework will be useful as teachers grow in their ability to develop and implement dynamic and effective journal writing programs in schools today. As curricular trends come and go, journal writing can always be a reliable and effective learning experience in the primary grades.

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